Nothing but the Clouds Unchanged

ARTISTS IN WORLD WAR I

EDITED BY GORDON HUGHES AND PHILIPP BLOM
Nothing but the clouds unchanged: artists in World War I / edited by Gordon Hughes and Philipp Blom.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
N8260.N68 2014
709.041—dc23
2014016079


Frontispiece: Otto Dix (German, 1891–1969). Detail of Self-Portrait as a Soldier, 1914. See Biro, fig. 2.

This volume accompanies a related exhibition titled World War I: War of Images, Images of War, on view at the Getty Research Institute from 18 November 2014 to 19 April 2015 and the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis from 11 September 2015 to 4 January 2016.
“NOW RELEASED FROM THE HOSPITAL, ‘FIT FOR SERVICE,’ ALTHOUGH I FEEL SHATTERED. I’M NOT THE SAME MAN WHO VOLUNTEERED IN AUGUST.”¹ Oskar Schlemmer (1888–1943) (fig. 1) made this remark in a letter of January 1915 after recovering from a leg injury suffered on the western front, where he had seen action near Verdun and Lille in the fall of 1914. Just months earlier, as a student at the Stuttgart Akademie der bildenden Künste working under Adolf Hölzel, Schlemmer had been consumed by the possibilities of cubism and abstract painting, as well as by the politics of reform at the academy. Back in Stuttgart in early 1915, Schlemmer, ashamed of his idleness, accepted that there was “no escape, [and felt] desperate eagerness to return to the front.”² Deployed to the eastern front in June, Schlemmer suffered another minor injury, this time in his arm. For the rest of the war, Schlemmer would remain behind the front lines. In 1916, he was assigned to a surveying unit based in Mullhouse and later in Colmar, where he wrote: “Am surrounded by vast sheets of paper and colored inks and geometry, and still I complain.”³ In 1918, as Schlemmer began officer training in Berlin, the war ended.

Throughout the war years, Schlemmer was able, off and on, to paint as well as to develop new experiments in dance. Indeed, his wartime diaries are as filled with wide-ranging thoughts on art, literature, and religion as they are with accounts of the war and his life as a soldier. “I, unlike other, more fortunate beings,” he remarks in his diary, “do not regard being a soldier as an end in itself. I love life—the life of the mind.”⁴ Receiving a four-month educational leave in late 1915, Schlemmer pushed the flattened, cubism-influenced surfaces he had been developing before the war toward an increasing abstraction and formal rigor (for example, Composition on Pink, 1916, private collection, and Painting K, 1916, private collection). Some of this new work was included in the exhibition Hölzel and His Circle, shown in Freiburg and Frankfurt in 1916.

More significantly, although the full details are unknown, Schlemmer used a charity event for his regiment in Stuttgart in December 1916 as an opportunity to stage early versions of several dances from his Triadic Ballet, a project that was strikingly shaped by the war and would consume Schlemmer during the postwar years.⁵ Following demobilization, Schlemmer returned briefly to the Stuttgarter Akademie. He left again in early 1920 to focus on the Triadic Ballet, an increasingly ambitious work of choreography and costume design that might be understood, especially in its distorted and physically punishing costumes, as a restaging of the traumatic experience of war.

By the fall of 1920, Schlemmer—who also held exhibitions that year at Herwarth Walden’s Der Sturm gallery in Berlin (with Willi Baumeister and Walter Dexel) and at the Galerie Ernst Arnold in Dresden (with Baumeister and...
Kurt Schwitters)—had been invited by Walter Gropius to teach at the new Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar. Schlemmer would spend most of the next decade, the core of his career, at the Bauhaus, throwing himself into the program and life of the school, where, at various times between 1921 and 1929, he led the mural painting, stone and wood sculpture, and stage workshops.

... World War I is etched into the foundations of the Bauhaus. Henry van de Velde’s forced resignation in 1915 from the Großherzoglich Sächsische Kunstgewerbeschule in Weimar, due to his Belgian nationality, opened the door for Gropius’s postwar appointment in 1919 to lead the Staatliche Bauhaus, a reconfigured combination of the former Kunstgewerbeschule and the Großherzoglich Sächsische Hochschule für Bildende Kunst in Weimar. Gropius had served as a sergeant major and then lieutenant on the western front, where he was seriously wounded in 1918. Collectively, the students and masters who would soon constitute the school experienced all facets of the war.

Schlemmer’s future student Joost Schmidt, who in 1927 would become a master at the Bauhaus in Dessau, provides a particularly illuminating account of how closely the Bauhaus and its early ethos were wrapped into the war. As a frustrated student of applied arts in Weimar before the war, Schmidt was planning a study trip to Paris and was determined to visit the Gothic cathedrals of northern France on his way. With the outbreak of war, it was perversely as a soldier, not as an artist, that Schmidt would make part of this journey. “Yes,” he recalls in his unpublished memoir, “I got to see the French cathedrals, but how! The first was the cathedral of St. Quentin.
In 1914 I saw it undamaged, and in 1918 its ruins.” Still on his way to the front near Reims, Schmidt snuck away from his transport long enough to quickly explore the Laon cathedral:

In the fall of 1914 we were sent to the front for the first time, just outside Reims. The dead from the last battles still lay before the trenches. Beyond no-man’s land was the city with the cathedral towering above it. Through binoculars I marveled at its details. One night German shelling set Reims ablaze. From the sea of flames of the burning city, the dark silhouette of the cathedral stood out. Its roof burned brightly [lichterlich]. The dead between the front lines were illuminated like ghosts [gespentisch]. This macabre image ate into [einfressen sich in] my soul. 6

When the Bauhaus opened five years later in October 1919, the image and concept of the Gothic cathedral loomed large as a model of artistic collaboration, community, and the unification of the arts and crafts. Not only was the cathedral the central metaphor of Gropius’s 1919 Bauhaus Manifesto (with Lyonel Feininger’s cubo-futurist woodcut Cathedral on its cover); it was also used by Schlemmer in a programmatic statement he drafted for the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition, in which he refers to the Bauhaus ambition “to build the cathedral of socialism.” 7 Schmidt’s accounts of Reims and Saint Quentin are particularly instructive for the way they reframe the Bauhaus rhetoric of the cathedral within the lived experience of the First World War. To the romanticized communal idealism and optimism of the early Bauhaus, Schmidt’s wartime recollections of devastated French cathedrals add a countervailing note of destruction, trauma, and death.

• • •

Never the direct subject of his work, the experience of war remained latent in Schlemmer’s postwar practice; it was a force that manifested itself only in complex and unspoken ways. It is important to note that even before the war Schlemmer had a tendency toward clean lines and a rationalized geometric language. Thus, while it is tempting to look, for example, at his 1922 “Bauhaus Head” signet—a starkly simplified geometric head in profile with an expression of steeled determination that was used at the Bauhaus in many variants—as an icon of a new postwar hardening, Schlemmer, in fact, had developed this basic design before the war and used it in a 1914 exhibition poster in Stuttgart. 8 The war and its traumatic memories may be more apparent in the figures from Schlemmer’s work in painting, sculpture, and theater in the early 1920s that, still working within a geometric language, are also strongly characterized by disfiguration, dismemberment, and prosthesis. This is particularly evident in Schlemmer’s costume design for the Triadic Ballet, which had its full premiere in September 1922 at the Württembergische Landestheater in Stuttgart, followed a year later by performances in Weimar and Dresden. 9

Schlemmer began to work seriously on choreography and dance in 1912 after meeting dancers Albert Burger and Elsa Hötzel in Stuttgart. In 1916, as noted above, he managed to stage his initial sketches for what would become the Triadic Ballet
(performed by Burger and Hötzel) at a benefit for his regiment in Stuttgart. By 1919, the development of the Triadic Ballet had become Schlemmer’s near-constant preoccupation. He left Stuttgart for nearby Canstatt in 1920 in order to work with his brother Carl, or “Casca,” on the ballet’s elaborate costumes. The same year, he hesitated for months to accept Gropius’s offer to join the Bauhaus for fear of disrupting his work on the Triadic Ballet, even receiving “permission to stay away until the ballet project is finished.”

In its fullest version, the Triadic Ballet included three acts (yellow, rose, and black), which corresponded to three sequences of dances Schlemmer labeled the “cheerful burlesque,” “ceremonious and solemn” [festlich-getragene], and “mythical-fantasy,” with a total of twelve dances performed as solos, duets, or trios by three dancers in eighteen costumes. Some of the dances incorporated naturalistic movements and traditional ballet forms, while others pushed forcefully toward an abstraction that would “follow the plane geometry of the dance surface and the solid geometry of the moving bodies, producing that sense of spatial dimension that necessarily results from tracing such basic forms as the straight line, the diagonal, the circle, the ellipse, and their combinations.” Conceived as a trinity on many levels—three acts, three dancers, three moods, a trinity of music (for which Schlemmer never found an adequate solution), costume, and dance, and so on—the Triadic Ballet was dominated, nonetheless, by its sculptural, highly structured costumes. Through visual reference and startling physical constraints, Schlemmer’s costumes defined the ballet’s characters, reordered their bodies, and restricted their movements.

The Abstract (fig. 2), perhaps the ballet’s central character and something of an alter ego for Schlemmer (who danced the role himself on several occasions), wears a large one-eyed mask and wields both a sword and a club. Split into unequal areas of light and dark punctuated by areas of red and blue, The Abstract is marked especially by a permanently outstretched, oversized conical white leg that cannot be bent, be held up for any length of time, or even fully support the weight of the dancer. Although clearly phallic, The Abstract is also impotent, as the permanently outstretched leg reduces the dancer to a limping, one-legged hop.

Other characters in the Triadic Ballet carry more extreme undercurrents of violence and dismemberment. Gold Sphere is dominated by an armless ovoid torso, whose missing limbs have either been severed or pulled back within the figure’s protective shell. Sphere Hands is a figure whose handless arms end in swollen colored balls. The twin Disk Dancers, whose heads and bodies are set with thin blade-like disks, move toward each other from opposite directions, appearing to slowly slice through one another as they merge together. The glittering Wire (fig. 3), who is prevented from lowering her arms by the dense rows of wire hoops ringing her waist and repeated on her head, can appear as a figure snarled within coils of barbed wire. And The Diver (fig. 4), from the ballet’s so-called cheerful burlesque sequence, is armless, grotesquely deformed, and, given the oversized diver’s mask, perhaps even headless.

What deformities may lurk beneath the shells of these costumes? As a soldier returning to active duty in 1915, Schlemmer asked himself rhetorically: “What does the mighty chaos of war hold in store for me? A bullet through the chest? ... Will I be crippled? Will I lose my right hand, my right arm, my sight?” Each of these fears
could serve as descriptors of one or more of the bodies Schlemmer would later devise for the Triadic Ballet. For all their whimsy, Schlemmer’s figures are also specters of the soldier’s experience, alluding to and echoing the mutilated bodies, artificial limbs, and reduced abilities of the war’s wounded veterans. As he noted to his soon-to-be wife, Helena “Tut” Tutein, in 1919, around the time he was crafting these costumes: “My true self—which, in fact, is my innermost being—is usually surrounded by a shell formed by the outside world. If I accidentally reveal some of it, it is always in the form of a joke, or between the lines.” ¹⁶

Schlemmer later acknowledged and justified the physical inhibitions and indeed violence of his costumes in formal terms when he explained that “the seemingly violated body achieves new expressive forms of dance the more it fuses with the costume.” ¹⁷ That is, for Schlemmer, the tension and kinesthetic sense created by the restrictive costumes was precisely the point; the dancers’ bodies would transcend the limitations of both costume and convention to produce new aesthetic forms.

**FIGURE 2. OSKAR SCHLEMMER (GERMAN, 1888-1943), WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATELIER GRILL (KARL GRILL).** The Abstract (detail), 1927, pencil, crayons, and watercolor on graph paper with pasted photographs, 29.7 x 20.9 cm (11⅜ x 8⅝ in.).

Art historian Juliet Koss has written persuasively about the "human dolls" of the Bauhaus theater, connecting the "eerily charming" character of Schlemmer's figures (which combine the "familiar playfulness of dolls and sinister hollowness of mechanical creatures") to Freud's theory of the uncanny, the simultaneous experience of familiarity and estrangement. More precisely, we might identify the uncanny in the figures of the Triadic Ballet through the violent imaginary of Schlemmer's costumes. For all of their whimsy, what is strangely familiar in Schlemmer's figures may be less their marionette-like appearance as half-human, half-mechanical beings, and more their grotesque combination of disfigurations and prosthetic attachments—something that had an uncomfortable parallel in the legions of wounded war veterans in Germany and throughout Europe.

In another example, Schlemmer's Free Sculpture G (Abstract Figure) (1923), with its precise geometries and mechanical rigidity, has often been interpreted as a classicizing ideal of machine-age beauty. Closely modeled after examples of antique
statuary, Abstract Figure might also be considered a wounded body with prosthetic replacements and a defensive armor protecting it from further damage.\(^{19}\)

As is often the case in Schlemmer’s work, the geometric language of rationalist modernism used for the basic structure and form of Abstract Figure, as well as for the Triadic Ballet, belies a powerful specter of vulnerability, violation, and bodily damage. These works, in other words, are haunted by the unspoken memory of war and shaped by its traumatic return.

Insisting on such an interpretation as the main way to understand Schlemmer’s figures from the Triadic Ballet would be misguided. I have chosen selectively. But like so much of European modernism between the wars, Schlemmer’s work deals in part with the four and a half years of war and its exceptional human cost in dead and wounded.\(^{20}\) Schlemmer’s grotesquely costumed figures and other works from the early 1920s using formal strategies of disfiguration, fragmentation, and dismemberment gain richer meanings when understood against this backdrop.

... Schlemmer left the Bauhaus in 1929 to join the Staatliche Akademie für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe Breslau, where in 1932 he would paint The Bauhaus Staircase (New York, The Museum of Modern Art) as a memorial to the school in the throes of persecution and closure. Soon the academy would also close. In 1933, Schlemmer was summarily dismissed from a new teaching appointment in Berlin, and in 1937 his works were included in the Entartete Kunst (Degenerate art) exhibition. Confounded by the cultural politics of National Socialism, Schlemmer would not outlive the Second World War.\(^{21}\) He died in 1943 while supporting himself working in a painting factory owned by a sympathetic supporter in Wuppertal.

A quarter century earlier, in November 1917, Schlemmer wrote from his cartographic unit in Alsace with the mix of humor, transcendent idealism, and despair that characterized so much of his life and work: “A forest near Colmar. When I am feeling tired, empty, and numb I go there. A narrow path and almost at once the eminently calming green gathers all good spirits around me. Hölderlin appears, and with him everything that is good. I am known as a Schlemihl, the man without a shadow, when in fact what people see is the shadow without the man”—a man, it might be added, now in the midst of the idealized peace of nature and of Hölderlin’s verse, far from the front, but still assailed by its memory.\(^{22}\)

- NOTES -


3 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 43.

4 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 21. “In fact,” Schlemmer further claimed to his friend Otto Meyer-Amden, “painting is the major source of my uneasiness, even in the trenches, if you can believe that.” Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 33–34.

10 A skilled craftsman, Carl Schlemmer worked briefly at the Bauhaus in 1921 and 1922 as craft master for the wall painting and stained glass workshops.
11 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 96.
14 Elswit, "The Some of the Parts," 401.
15 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 21.
16 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 74.
22 Schlemmer, Letters and Diaries, 47. Translation altered. "Schlemihl" is a reference to Adelbert von Chamisso's 1814 novella Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte (Peter Schlemihl's miraculous story).